

Chair H. Morgan Griffith
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Oversight & Investigations Hearing
“Closing the Digital Divide: Overseeing Federal Funds for
Broadband Deployment”
May 10, 2023

Welcome everyone to what I hope will be a productive, fact-finding hearing on a subject that is very important to the people in my district – access to broadband.

The use of broadband has become routine for many Americans.

People count on broadband to stay connected with each other, foster new economic opportunities, and engage with the wider world.

Unfortunately, large sections of rural areas throughout America, including many parts of my District, lack reliable access to broadband, putting these Americans at a disadvantage.

This lack of broadband access in rural communities, known as the digital divide, has persisted despite many attempts by the federal government to close it.

When it comes to broadband access, many people in my district aren't under-served - they are **un-served**.

According to GAO, at least 17 percent of rural Americans lack access to fixed broadband at the minimum speed of 25 over 3

Megabits per second (Mbps) compared to 1 percent of Americans in urban areas.¹

That is a population of un-served people, and this is a separate issue from the question of affordability in those areas. If you are un-served, you cannot get access regardless of cost.

The digital divide is not a new problem. On the contrary, it has been talked about for years.

It is also not a problem that has lacked funding from the government. The federal government has been funding efforts to close the digital divide for decades and has spent billions of dollars, yet the problem remains.

Most recently, The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 allocated nearly \$48 billion to support broadband deployment in unserved and underserved areas:

- \$42.45 billion through the “Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment,” also known as the “BEAD” program,
- \$2 billion for the Tribal Connectivity Program,
- \$1 billion for the Middle Mile Grant Program,
- and \$2 billion for the ReConnect Program.

This does not include the money set aside for digital equity programs.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration, known as NTIA, housed inside the Department

¹ Gov’t Accountability Office, *National Strategy Needed to Guide Federal Efforts to Reduce Digital Divide*, (GAO_22-104611), at 5-6 (May 2022) <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104611>

of Commerce, is in charge of administering the majority of these funds.

Prior to these programs, from 2015 to 2020 the Federal Government invested 44 billion dollars to increase Americans' access to broadband and yet millions of Americans still lack access.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, a recent GAO report highlighted how Government efforts to expand access to broadband have been riddled with the classic problems we see with government run programs:

- According to the GAO, federal broadband efforts are “fragmented and overlapping.”
- Within the many federal programs relating to increasing broadband access there is potential for overlap, duplication and conflicting messages.
- The federal efforts to increase broadband access involve 100 programs administered by 15 agencies.
- Think of that – 15 agencies with 100 programs riddled with a lack of coordination.

And to make it worse, according to the GAO report from last May, the United States broadband efforts are not guided by a national strategy with clear roles, goals objectives and performance measures.

Also troubling, is that, according to GAO, the administration has not decided if a national strategy is needed.

A national strategy is needed, and strong leadership to coordinate all of these agencies' spending on broadband access is needed.

GAO has identified the FCC and the NTIA as having significant roles in expanding broadband access and I look forward to this committee conducting future oversight of these federal agencies and their spending on broadband access.

Today, however, I am curious to hear from our witnesses about the various challenges currently facing the government agencies tasked with expanding Americans access to broadband and I look forward to their testimony.